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US Foreign Policy after the 2016 Elections

Presidential Contenders' Opposing Concepts and Domestic Political Dynamics

Marco Overhaus and Lars Brozus

Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump are an unlikely couple. She the experienced politician and former Secretary of State, he the outsider, whose opinions frequently appear crude and contradictory. Moreover, they both advocate completely different ideals as far as America's role in the world is concerned. Clinton champions a liberal international order, to the preservation of which the USA is dedicating significant resources, while Trump is putting his chips on "America first". Which of these ideals will shape US politics in the future does not solely depend on the presidential election results. The policy realignment currently being implemented by the two major parties could prove just as relevant.

The US primaries indicate that both Democrats and Republicans are realigning their policies in order to accommodate the preferences of important voter groups. Processes of social transformation including demographic change, the greater politicisation of minorities and growing social inequality are forcing both parties to remobilise sections of the electorate and get new ones on board.

For a considerable period of time, the leadership of the Republican Party espoused a foreign and economic policy which resulted in economic disadvantages in the eyes of an important group of their voters. According to Donald Trump's catchy statements, deregulation, free trade orientation, a liberal immigration policy and the support of global military alliances have compounded to provoke the impoverishment of the white American working and middle

classes. His success demonstrates that the Republicans' strategy of propagating socially conservative values in "compensation" for a policy which comes at the economic expense of its own voters no longer delivers the goods.

The Democrat leadership is also feeling the pressure to accommodate the preferences of important swathes of the electorate. Hillary Clinton is relying on the so-called "Obama coalition", consisting of ethnic and sexual minorities. They are pursuing a domestic agenda, focusing, for example, on the dismantling of social, economic and political discrimination. Simultaneously, Clinton's internal opponent Bernie Sanders is pushing for even more emphasis on issues of social justice.

How large a punch this party policy realignment actually packs is a contentious

issue within the US debate. If it persists, it could result in a stronger domestic orientation in the USA.

Liberal internationalism versus Jacksonian populism

Since the Second World War, US foreign policy has been marked by a school of thought known as “liberal internationalism”. This operates on the premise that a liberal international order, interpreted as a network of inter- and multinational norms, regulations and institutions, is in America’s interest. This applies, above all, from an economic perspective, as far as trade and financial relations are concerned, but also includes a liberal immigration policy. Part of this fundamental foreign policy consensus is not only the implicitness of an American leadership role, but, in addition, the creation of international alliances and their consolidation via a global network of foreign military bases, which are required to take action against “troublemakers”.

As a leading figure, Hillary Clinton embodies this cross-party consensus like almost no other. She has supported the free trade policy of her husband, the then president Bill Clinton, since the 1990s, whose tally included the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). She voted in favour of the 2003 Iraq War, and championed the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) as Secretary of State under Obama. She also endorsed the deployment of the US military several times – in Libya in 2011, for instance.

By contrast, Donald Trump is pursuing a foreign policy vision in which international relations equate to a zero-sum game. This paradigm holds that the USA neglects its own security if it supports the security of other countries. If, for example, the USA deploys its forces throughout the world in order to protect foreign borders, it is putting the security of its own citizens in second place. If China benefits from WTO accession, factories in the USA close and

American workers lose their jobs.

Trump’s statements to date are indicative of a marked disinterest in questions of international order. The key phrase of his rudimentary foreign policy agenda, “America first”, underscores the fact that US interests are the top priority, particularly those of the American working and middle classes. Trump wishes to use international politics to push through “better deals”. The allies in Europe and Asia should pay more for their security, and the USA should no longer be disadvantaged by international agreements. This applies both to the Paris Agreement under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change as well as to the TPP and the TTIP.

All this does not make Donald Trump an isolationist. He has announced his intention to increase funding for the US military, and to take extreme action against the “Islamic State” and other terror organisations – and, something characteristic of his position – this without concern for the standards of international law.

Trump is piggybacking on a political tradition christened “Jacksonian Populism” by American political scientist Walter Russell Mead, named for the 7th President of the USA. The historical and cultural roots of this tradition lie in the frontier experiences of the white, Protestant settlers and early farmer communities. They literally fenced themselves off from their hostile environment, and went to considerable expense in order to defend the borders of their settlement spaces. Although “Jacksonian Populism” has always featured in the USA’s foreign policy debate, it was not a major influence for most of the time.

Against the background of these foreign policy alternatives and domestic dynamics, three scenarios appear plausible for the outcome of the elections and their foreign policy implications.

Scenario 1: President Donald Trump

In the first scenario, Trump, should he be elected the 45th President of the United

States on 8 November 2016, would implement his foreign policy agenda predominantly using uni- and bilateral strategies. He would increase the pressure on the allies, demanding greater financial contribution to international security from them. In terms of trade policy, he would condemn what he sees as the unfair valuation of the Chinese currency, and threaten punitive tariffs. TTIP would either be off the table or put on the back burner. Trump would also attempt to back out of international agreements such as the Paris Agreement on Climate Change.

His critics on both sides of the Atlantic can hope that he would be restrained by the system of checks and balances in place in the US political system. The US constitution divides the authority over foreign policy between the President and the Congress. In principle, three ways for Congress to influence foreign policy exist, namely via budget legislation, its confirmation of high-ranking government posts and its consent to internationally binding treaties.

Historically, the USA's political system has increasingly been characterised by the centralisation of foreign policy authority in the executive, particularly in the White House. The growing workforce at the White House, including the National Security Council, is a clear indication of this. On the one hand, the presidential office is strengthened by this development, while, on the other, the President is subject to internal constraints, reliant on an increasingly large team of advisers which does not, however, share his visions unequivocally. This would also apply in the event that President Trump decided to prune the outgrowths of presidential bureaucracy. The pool of qualified government officials is limited, even in Washington, and many of these are close to the "foreign policy establishment" rejected by Trump.

Whether and to what extent President Trump could be reined in by Congress or his own bureaucracy depends on the thematic issues in question. Congress tends to play a more significant role in areas

including trade, migration and development cooperation than it does in issues of national security and military operations. However, the elected representatives are frequently only able to exercise a power of veto as opposed to bringing about effective agenda-setting. It follows that Congress might be able to thwart an entry ban for Muslims, but would be unable to force the Trump administration to promote an international free trade agenda.

It should also be remembered that, in times of crises, US presidents enjoy far greater room for manoeuvre than in "normal" times. After the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, for example, President George W. Bush considerably expanded the powers of the executive, placing particular emphasis on the intelligence agencies.

Scenario 2: Clinton wins, Trump disappears

This scenario reflects the widely-held assumption that the strong showing by the anti-establishment candidates in the primaries will remain a flash in the pan. If Clinton should win the presidential elections, Trump and his populist visions of foreign and domestic policy will vanish into oblivion. Ultimately, the fundamental foreign policy consensus in the USA will win through. This supposition is based, not least, on past experiences of the rise and fall of earlier populists. In 1992, for instance, the billionaire Ross Perot, standing as an independent candidate, scored several successes in the presidential election campaign against his opponents George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton, but left scarcely a political trace.

Hillary Clinton is widely regarded as a hawk as far as security and defence policy is concerned. Despite setbacks in Iraq and Afghanistan, she considers US military interventions a viable instrument. As a result, it would be reasonable to expect Clinton to adhere to several key aspects of her predecessor's foreign policy while simultaneously displaying fewer reserva-

tions about deploying the US military in international crisis regions than Obama. Her foreign policy would continue to reflect the vision of international liberalism, particularly if the Republican Party is able to divest itself of Donald Trump's domestic and foreign policy demands.

Scenario 3: Clinton in a changing political landscape

By contrast, the third scenario starts from the premise that both parties will orient themselves permanently to the expectations of remobilised or newly-acquired sections of the electorate.

The Democratic Party is moving further into the liberal spectrum (to the left in a European sense), relying as it is increasingly on voters with a pronounced interest in issues surrounding identity politics. They are concerned with topics including the equality of women or curbing the discrimination of minorities by the police and the justice system ("Black Lives Matter"). The Democrats are also coming under pressure from the supporters of Bernie Sanders to focus more strongly on social inequality and the influence of the finance industry. That Clinton took an ambivalent stand on TPP and TTIP during the election campaign, which contradicted her policy as Secretary of State in some respects, might be indicative of this development.

As far as the Republicans are concerned, voter preferences, some of which are diametrically opposed to the official party line, were asserted during the primaries under Donald Trump's representation. It is clear that important sections of the electorate are no longer willing to tolerate what they deem the negative effects of economic deregulation and liberalisation, i.e. the loss of well-paid industrial jobs and the increase in precarious employment in the service industry. In this third scenario, the party will thus continue to be shaped by these views even if Trump loses the election.

In future, Clinton's own party will force her to pursue a social and liberal domestic

agenda, and, above all, to concentrate her attention on solving domestic problems. Although the "new" Republicans do not share this "socially liberal" domestic agenda, they are aiming for a stronger domestic orientation and a strict foreign policy alignment to the USA's national economic interests. In the final analysis, Clinton's foreign policy will become less internationalist and less interventionist than one might assume on the basis of her hitherto stated positions.

Conclusion: transatlantic dissonance

The first and third scenarios are tantamount to a stronger domestic orientation for the USA. Although phases like this have always been anticipated in the past, they have never resulted in major distortions in transatlantic relations. This may well be the case once more. To date, however, the USA's foreign policy commitment has rested on a broad domestic foundation, in line with the liberal international order influenced by Washington. In the event that this should change in view of a stronger orientation by both parties to voter groups that are becoming strategically more important, future US administrations may take a far firmer, more forceful line with their partners and allies.

That said, this would certainly apply more in the case of a Trump presidency than it would if Clinton won the election. However, even if the latter scenario materialises, Germany and the EU should prepare themselves for ever louder calls from Washington to demonstrate greater commitment to the preservation of international order and to make greater contributions. As a result, the need for Berlin and Brussels to define and express their own expectations towards US policies becomes all the more pressing.

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